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SUBJECT: TALABANI VISIT TO TURKEY: PURSUING THE POLITICAL TRACK

REF: A. ANKARA 0461

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Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker. Reason 1.4 (b) & (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: The successful March 7/8 visit of President Talabani to Turkey has changed dramatically the political atmosphere between the two countries, and created the space for setting in motion diplomatic steps that can lead to concrete cooperation on the PKK problem. To be successful, this must include direct engagement between the Turkish and KRG leadership. President Talabani told us March 11 (ref B) that the Turks appeared ready to engage, beginning with a meeting between Turkey's Iraq coordinator and KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. We are also hearing from the KRG leaders readiness to talk to the Turks. It is important that we encourage both sides to seize the moment to take this first step. The other initiatives discussed by Talabani with his Iraqi interlocutors, resumption of contacts by TNIO Chief Taner and reactivation of the trilateral mechanism, assuming that the Turks are on board, ought to be quickly pursued as well. If pursued simultaneously and supported by political and economic initiatives in Turkey's Southeast, we think these measures have a chance of getting some real progress on removing the PKK as an obstacle to normal relations between these two neighbors. Our sense is that we need to make political progress quickly if we are to head off either another significant ground forces attack by Turkey across the border into Iraq or a major terrorist attack in Turkey by the PKK, either of which would deprive the diplomatic track of the positive political will that is necessary for it to succeed. End Summary.

12. (S) During their meeting in Ankara, President Talabani and Prime Minister Erdogan articulated a vision of a strategic partnership between Turkey and Iraq that would include political as well as economic elements. The discussion was very useful for creating a more positive dynamic between the two countries and the vision is one we think merits support, but we see little prospect of its realization absent significant progress on the PKK problem and the cycle of attack and counter-attack. The two leaders discussed a number of political initiatives and agreed on the first step to launch the process. In this message we provide some additional ideas as to how to get these initiatives up and running.

Political Track

13. (S) Recognizing that a solution to the PKK problem can only be achieved through GOT/KRG engagement, Prime Minister Erdogan agreed with President Talabani that the first step would be a meeting in Iraq. Subsequently, KRG President Massoud Barzani told Ambassador Crocker that he is committed to sending KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani to Baghdad to meet with Turkish Special Envoy to Iraq Murat Ozcelik and PM Foreign Affairs Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu. It is likely that Nechirvan

Barzani's trip, which also has the purpose of resolving difficult issues between the KRG and the GOI, will take place after the March 20 Nawruz celebration. We will need to encourage both sides to approach this discussion with the same willingness to engage on difficult topics which characterized the Talabani/Gul and Talabani/Erdogan discussions. Ideally this meeting could lead to a subsequent engagement between the Turkish envoy or envoys and KRG President Massoud Barzani in Erbil as was discussed, according to Talabani, in his meeting with Erdogan in Ankara.

¶4. (S) TNIO Taner's proposal to meet with the PKK leadership either in the northern Iraq or in Europe is the type of bold GOT step that could generate real progress, especially if Barzani is genuinely willing to work toward a PKK cease fire. We would hope that Taner's initiative could be resumed as soon as possible.

Revival of the Trilateral Mechanism

¶5. (S) Talabani reported that there was agreement in Ankara that a trilateral mechanism could play a useful role. Both Talabani and Massoud Barzani have told us they support such a mechanism. It would be prudent for Embassy Ankara to pulse its contacts to determine whether the Turks are indeed on board. This would allow Washington to quickly move on appointing a U.S. envoy who was able to come out to the region, ideally by early April. To be successful, we would recommend that this mechanism consist of representatives of the three sides working together full-time in Northern Iraq. Their focus would be on finding ways to degrade the PKK organization, by working to put additional pressure on the leadership and the camps while simultaneously encouraging the Turks to take measures that deprive the group of its raison

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d,etre. The goal would be to secure a decision by the PKK leadership to lay down its arms, or at least by a significant portion of its membership.

Makhmour Refugee Camp

¶6. (S) GOT movement towards implementing political and economic measures to address Kurdish political grievances and aspirations will help to undercut the PKK leadership's rationale for armed struggle while an offer of amnesty could also provide a means of inducing non-combatants to return to Turkey. An amnesty, even if initially limited in scope, would send an important signal to the Kurds and KRG.

¶7. (S) Makhmour refugee camp could be an appropriate amnesty test case, given its population of women, children, and the elderly, generally not considered security risks. Following screening with the assistance of UNHCR, they could be repatriated to Turkey within the framework of an amnesty program. This program could subsequently be expanded to cover other groups within the camp. MNF-I, Embassy, PRT and UNHCR officials visited the camp March 6 to meet with camp and local officials. We intend to begin a more sustained dialogue with camp leadership and with UNHCR with the goal of laying the groundwork for the eventual closure of the camp.

Bilateral Track

¶8. (S) In the wake of General Saygun's January 15 visit, the Turks have proposed follow-up steps that would initiate some modest Turkish-Iraqi military cooperation. In addition to contributing to the good atmosphere, this initiative, with progress on other tracks, could help the two sides begin to develop some confidence that could eventually lead to real counter-terrorism coordination including, for example, joint border patrols. We support the establishment of the

technical committee Saygun proposed to Joint Forces Deputy Commander Nasir Abadi. The GOI has already appointed two and three-star level representatives to sit on the Commission. A list of participants for the courses the GOT offered is also in preparation. We hope that a return visit will not be far off.

Bilateral Counter-terrorism Agreement

¶ 9. (S) The counter-terrorism agreement signed by Iraq and Turkey September 28 should be implemented. The problems surrounding the recent CBO made more urgent resumption of negotiation on Article IV of the Agreement (which was not included) dealing with CBO notification and allowing for hot pursuit under certain circumstances. According to the terms of the signed agreement, the two parties are to reconvene six months after signature (March 28, 2008) to review the agreement and its implementation. We should encourage the Iraqi and Turkish interior ministers to fulfill the terms of the agreement and schedule a meeting.

A Narrow Window of Opportunity

¶ 10. (S) It is important that we not squander the political breathing space created by Talabani's visit. We judge the KRG leaders to be in a receptive mode for the moment but any number of developments could change that dynamic, making it all the more important that we get these initiatives moving now.

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